

## VALORIZATION OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION'S PRINCIPLES IN THE BUSINESS HIGHER EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM (HES)

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**Abstract.** *A major factor of influence for the business education domain is the business environment itself. As members of education institutions, we all know that there still exists a great gap between theory, what students learn during their academic cycle, and practice, what they are expected to do in the real business environment. At some point, we have all confronted ourselves during our teaching activity with learning paradoxes and several learning barriers. We shall further discuss through this paper what these concepts refer to and we shall explain why they must be overcome. Nowadays, the quality standards for the education system are very high and they are set by the business actors. The preparation of a good professional in a specific business area depends not only on the prestige of the education institution, the experience of the professor, the information technology available in the laboratory but mainly on developing the right way of thinking and thus the most efficient and effective way of developing new projects, of finding innovative solutions and finally of achieving success. We believe that the academic education, in any domain, should enable students to think and to act as specialists. The purpose of this paper is to bring arguments that learning how to think strategically in the business environment is critically important and it should be the core of business academic education. In this context, we shall present the principles of a learning organization and what benefits they generate when they are accordingly applied. As a bottom line, we dare to say that top education is no more about the studied content but more about the thought / provided thinking patterns. The mission of a skilled professor, supported by the adequate environment, is to teach students the right way of thinking in that specific domain. Thus, the business education should prepare its students to think strategically as the business environment is more complex and dynamic than ever. Throughout the sections of this paper, we present several insights on how a university should apply the principles of a learning organization which we believe are very useful for the students and practitioners in the business field. Though it is a conceptual work - we consider it valuable for the subjects it approaches and for the ideas presented.*

**Keywords:** *learning organization; business education; knowledge strategies; knowledge dynamics; strategic thinking.*

### **Specificities of different types of learning**

Considered by many individuals as a simple and common process, learning has evolved from the basic stages described by Abraham Maslow to complex learning models. The stage of theoretical and descriptive writings on the concept of a learning organization is somewhat outdated and efforts of progress are achieved through education, research, implementation or training programs that lead to concrete results. In order to provide the necessary background to discuss the working principles and paradoxes within the Higher Educational System (HES), first, we need to present essential issues of the learning process: learning levels, learning stages, learning methods, types of learning and contexts of learning.

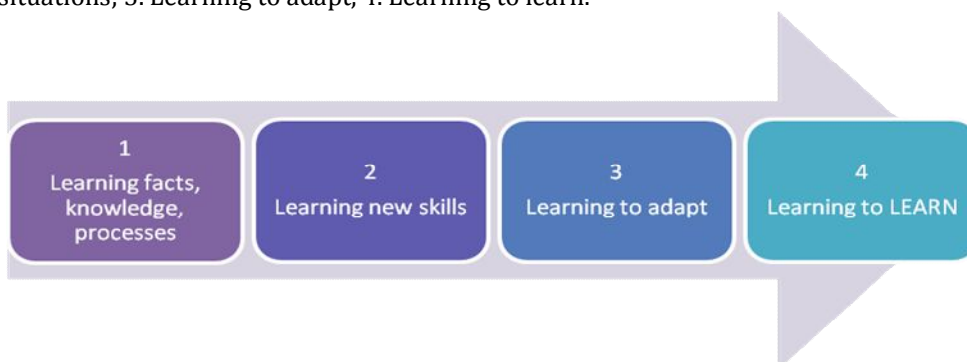
Within the business educational system, several featured aspects should be considered when preparing and delivering the educational package. Due to the complexity of our knowledge based society and the exponential changes that characterize our present time – and probably even more so, our future – the role of HES is also changing. A couple of decades ago, students in various types and levels of schools were preparing for specific and well-known professions, now schools need to assist their students in preparing for jobs that are not known at the time. Also, students must be trained and prepared for solving problems that have not even been recognized. These issues influence the very essence of learning, the way we view learning, as well as learning management technologies and methods that can be applied efficiently. We must acknowledge that these changes have a significant impact on teacher training, its content as well as its methods and on schools where teachers work (Baráth, 2015).

The increasing rhythm of change leads to another critical issue, which has been put into light by managers and entrepreneurs in the business and that is "the gap between what leaders want and what recruiters deliver". According to Harvard Business Review research, based on a survey of leaders from almost 700 global organizations, there is a significant gap between the importance of key recruitment activities to leaders and the performance of these tasks by recruiters. While managers understand the importance of hiring star players, recruiters simply are not doing a good job of finding them (Marks, 2016) In this case, both sides are taken. The recruitment process needs investment by the operational teams that need the recruits, to look at deeper abilities. To understand which skills or combinations of them are sufficiently similar to those required, that with a little learning curve, they will fit the requirements. Most of all, hirers should concentrate on the ability above experience, and discard the ridiculous proposition that someone is only capable of doing precisely the same thing they have been doing during the last three years (Marks, 2016). By analogy, we enquire whether HES is providing the employers in the business market with appropriately skilled and trained graduates.

In the context of an educational organization, learning methodology is closely related to the methodology for knowledge sharing. Considering the learning process in a strategic approach, lifelong learning refers to the increasing need of development on a personal level, on a collective level and on intellectual capital at the organizational level. According to Marsick and Watkins (1996), learning and knowledge sharing within an organization occur on four levels. First, as individuals learn on their own. Afterward, as they integrate into an organization and are involved in its development plan individuals move to learning as a group, as a team or working in an organization.

We support the idea that the development of methods of learning starts from an individual's willingness to learn and to evolve. Later they develop methods and techniques of group learning. Each of the four levels of learning should be approached accordingly. For the first level, the individual realizes meanings / significations up their skills and acquire knowledge. The next level, the peer learning is achieved when employees work together to create knowledge and develop the collaborative ability. At the organizational level, learning is reflected in the organization's culture, policies, operating procedures, and/or information systems. When the organizational level is exceeded then the thinking global level is reached.

We continue by presenting learning methods referring back to the levels and structure depending on the context / environment. Thus, for individual learning, a method that we may suggest is training at work or at home. In addition, for group / team learning we suggest constructive criticism (peer review) among members. Learning methods should be chosen so that the beneficial effects to be felt within the organization, not just by the person. Farago and Skymre (1995) suggest a model that structures learning methods on four levels as follows: 1. Learning facts, knowledge, processes and procedures; 2. Learning new skills / workplace skills that can be adaptable to different situations; 3. Learning to adapt, 4. Learning to learn.

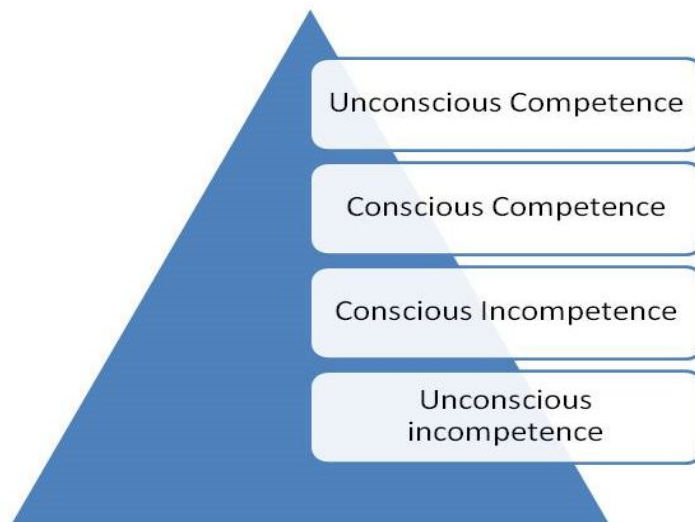


**Figure 1. Evolution of the four levels of learning (Farago & Skymre, 1995)**

Commenting on the profound significance of this model (Figure 1), we see an essential and valuable aspect, that neither the organizational learning process nor the learning organization concepts are limited to developing skills and gaining knowledge. They are more oriented to learn how to look into and understand better some problems and situations, so you manage to adapt your knowledge in a real context. We highlight here the superiority of know-why and know-how on the know-what. At this point, we also underline the superiority of the thinking models over the assimilated quantity of data, information, and knowledge. The third level of learning and adaptation emphasis is growing and that starts the creative processes of innovation. The top level is the most difficult to be reached. Buckler (1998) believes that an organization can only be as strong as the weakest employee can. This statement clearly springs from the systemic perspective that the author promotes. Imagining the organization as an interconnected system, we understand why a weak link is influencing and dictates the outcome. Dynamic components and systems converge towards a point of equilibrium and the learning organization finds balance through its branches (components).

As represented in Figure 2 the first elementary learning stage is called – *unconscious incompetence*. It represents that state of the art when the individual does not

understand or know how to do something and does not necessarily recognize the deficit. They may deny the usefulness of the skill. The individual must recognize his or her own incompetence, and the value of the new skill, before moving on to the next stage. The length of time an individual spends in this stage depends on the strength of the stimulus/motivation to learn. The next stage, considered superior, is called – *conscious incompetence* and represents the situation when the individual becomes aware of a certain deficit or a skill he/she lacks. The fact is that the person does not understand or know for sure how to do a certain thing even if he/she admits this shortage. At this point the might be made several mistakes as the learning process starts to develop. The following stage is named – *conscious competence*. From this moment further, the individual is aware of what he knows and what he must do to solve a problem. In addition, the conscious competence state reveals that in order to demonstrate his/her knowledge and skills the individual must concentrate and get to the action. This means that the whole process implies a certain effort. The – *unconscious competence* describes that stage where the individual has accumulated enough practice and experience in order to perform easily the required skills. In many cases, skills may be executed simultaneously. At this stage, the individual can teach its skills to others.



**Figure 2. Maslow's four stages of the learning process**

The learning process has a great importance for the business education suppliers as, for example, a university. For a long time, the mission of a university has been considered an implicit message and it was wrong. The contemporary reality has proved that the mission of a university has to be formulated explicitly and disseminated to the wide public. It may be approached from a double perspective: as a product and as a process. The product perspective allows the formulation of strategic objectives and represents a design of the strategic plan, which shall further be of great importance for the marketing campaigns. When approached as a process the mission of the university is elaborated and refined through several stages of consultations with the employees (professors and researchers), students and representatives of the employers in the external environment. In essence, the mission of a university is to offer / provide high standard education and research for academics and for the society (Brătianu, 2002).

Skerlavaj, Stemberger, Skrinjar and Dimovski (2007) talk about organizational learning cultures, which have the potential to change behaviors, both at the individual and at the organizational level. This is also the case for universities. In their approach, organizational learning culture is, by its nature, integrative, as it reunites elements from all the four quadrants of the competing values framework. It has to be oriented towards the interior, but also towards the exterior, it has to be flexible and democratic, but also to include some elements of control, to give the clarity and the structure of the learning processes. In this context, we may say that learning-supportive-cultures function as integrators, assembling variety into a coherent pattern that shapes the organizational behavior.

The learning organization follows these basic stages as it promotes continuous learning. It is obvious, after reviewing the Maslow model that any need for acquiring new knowledge and skills (competencies and capabilities) occurs after identification of needs, of obstacles and generally called – of problems.

*Figure 3. The five stages of organizational learning*

Summary		
Stage	What Organizations Do	Why they do it
<b>DEFENSIVE</b>	Deny practices, outcomes or responsibilities	To <b>defend attacks</b> to their reputation which may cause short term damage
<b>COMPLIANCE</b>	Adopt a policy based compliance approach as a cost of doing business	To <b>mitigate erosion of economic value</b> in the medium term
<b>MANAGERIAL</b>	Embed the societal issue in their core management processes	To <b>achieve longer term gains</b> by integrating responsible business practices into daily operations
<b>STRATEGIC</b>	Integrate the societal issue into their core business strategies	To <b>enhance economic value</b> in longer term and to gain first mover advantage by aligning strategy with societal issues
<b>CIVIL</b>	Promote broad industry participation in corporate responsibility	To enhance economic value by <b>overcoming first-mover disadvantages</b> through collective action

For Argyris and Schon (1978) the transition from individual cognition to organizational-level learning and change is partly possible because double-loop learning allows rational exposure of irrational modes of individual and group behavior (political or otherwise), while at the same time making explicit the rules, strategies, structures and roles that are the foundations of organizational learning (Caldwell, 2011).

The OECD analysis proves the importance of learning for both the society and the individual. Researchers considered three different occurrences of performance increase and, calculating with a life expectancy of 80 years of those born in 2010, they predicted that by 2090, the total economic growth in OECD countries would reach USD

115, 200 and 260 trillions. This growth is much larger than the expenses spent on development (Baráth, 2015).

### **Paradoxes and barriers regarding a learning organization**

The Higher Education System (HES) contains all accredited institutions of higher education, regardless of their structure and profile. Due to their essential role in knowledge acquisition, generation, transfer and diffusion and in cultural value preservation, universities represent core institutions of any country (Brătianu, 2009). For a university, the process of production and the process of management both operate in the field of knowledge. Although problematic, the ideal learning organization is promising more to organizations that seek to change rigid hierarchical structures, communication systems with restrictions and authoritarian leadership.

In order to underline the practical relevance of the functionality of a learning organization, we discuss contexts such as the university as a learning organization and libraries as learning organizations. In doing so we will appeal to the comments from the literature and personal judgments as to obtain a correct perception that requires alignment. Jain and Mutula (2008) proposed the issue of libraries as learning organizations. The justification for the choice of theme comes with growing pressure on libraries for them to become, in terms of their practice, learning organizations so that there should be a better knowledge management and should be cultivated a culture of lifelong learning in order to support dealing with present and future of these organizations. The perspective brings into focus the role of a learning organization, namely to create, share and disseminate knowledge and to enhance the ability to operate in a digital environment that is amplified. Taking the example of universities' libraries, we can state that they suffer strong transformations due to the expansion of new technologies, customer expectations, competitive pressure, development of the knowledge-intensive organizations and the transformation of librarians' roles. The relevance of this approach is that university libraries have been and are considered the "soul" of the institutions they belong. As a result, they are faced with challenges and opportunities that the digital domain should understand, as a learning organization and in this regard to reconsider roles / their duties.

A very strong paradox that professor Brătianu (2009) speaks about, due to his wide experience, research, and knowledge, is called the leadership paradox. Professor Brătianu explains that the paradox of the strategic management in the universities consists in the fact that leadership positions are assigned to those professors who have the best research results and academic prestige and not to those who have managerial capabilities and experience. According to these issues within an education organization, like a university, there is a great interest of the leadership to improve the education services and thus the learning process.

Professor Brătianu (2009) formulates the learning organization's paradox by analogy with academia as such: *though a university is an organization based on the learning processes is not necessarily a learning organization*. The possibility that the university becomes a learning organization is conditional on a strong integrator to ensure the transition from individual learning to team learning and organizational learning afterward. However, many universities are far from the model of a learning

organization as they are facing functional and mentally barriers. Similarly, with the business environment, the university production processes are identified with the production of learning and ensuring knowledge transfer and uses the knowledge management process. For a university to become a learning organization it is necessary that the management process becomes more focused on the learning process. This perspective is consistent with progress double-loop learning (described by Senge - double-loop learning) (Brătianu, 2009).

The concept of a learning organization is an ideal one that has not yet found the perfect implementation in practice as there are encountered several limitations and obstacles. More cautious authors have expressed criticism of the concept. For example, Finger and Woollis (1994) criticize learning organization literature oriented towards the human capital that considers people as "resources" to be exploited in actions aimed at obtaining profit for the organization. The authors say that the potential power of the market structure and value of processed knowledge remain unexamined and learning is distorted / twisted into a tool designed to gain competitive advantage. From another perspective, the learning organization could be criticized for its ideal of lifelong learning in teams and perfected to provide unfailing power to elites serving of such ideologies - obscuring the nature of always fighting individuals to maintain their jobs and nurturing a healthy mind in a chaotic work environment. These people come to overlap alternative identities and find themselves in another post, in an attempt to understand what they need to survive until the end of the day. Ultimately, the ideal of a learning organization is worth asking the following question: whose interests serve the concept of a learning organization, and what kind of power relations ensures? (Fenwick, 1996).

The so popular notion of "empowerment" of employees, which is prevailing the literature on the learning organization, is not examined objectively. In this regard West (1994) critically argues that "empowering" employees cannot be beneficial to the organization but only when their objectives overlap and do not conflict. Another paradox within the literature about learning organizations is that often it is prescriptive because actually hierarchies of power and technology that claim to be liberalized are mastered by the organization to control and destroy the resistance of employees during restructuring and organizational compliance on the agenda of continuous learning.

The third paradox is linked to context, connectivity, trust and opportunity that breaks in a climate of anxiety, darkness is not realized in the optimistic vision of a learning organization. Employees are told to trust the agenda of the organization that focuses on human development and are invited to witness and to give up their most intimate beliefs and desires and continue to learn - to forget that they are in constant danger of being dismissed in an expeditious manner (Fenwick, 1996).

Number four paradox shows up by analyzing the implementation of the principles of a learning organization: the theory supporting lifelong learning through exploration and production of knowledge innovation and organizational rules bumps of productivity, accounting and measuring results using their forecasting. Through this approach, Rowley (2000) shows that the traditional way of measuring organizational performance through training and preparation are still prevalent and distort concepts of systemic learning and dynamic new paradigm (Rowley, 2000).

The concept of a learning organization based on the administrative control of the dialogue between employees paradoxically oppose the assumptions of free knowledge, temporary relational technologies that learning organizations should produce. The paradoxical implications of the learning organization have an impact on employees and create a problem in terms of knowledge creation and its employees' identity. Thus the employees have to keep fighting to create an identity, meaning, and purpose in their work.

### **Principles of the learning organization to be applied within HES**

A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. This definition begins with a simple truth: new ideas are essential if learning is to take place. Sometimes they are genuine creations, through flashes of insight or creativity; at other times they arrive from outside the organization or are communicated by knowledgeable insiders. Whatever their source, these ideas are the trigger for organizational improvement. However, they cannot by themselves create a learning organization (Garvin, 1993).

When speaking of continuous adaptation to a changing world throughout the governance of HES it should be made more beyond. In the adaptation process, universities focus on their traditional mission of teaching, learning, and research. Today, society asks much more from universities in terms of their contribution. Thus, universities should switch from creating adaptation (adaptive) knowledge to produce generative knowledge, and to become learning organizations (Brătianu, 2011, 2014; Senge, 1990). That means for governance to become a strategic driving force of the university and a powerful integrator able to transform efficiently the potential intellectual capital into operational intellectual capital (Brătianu & Pînzaru, 2015).

This is a surprisingly stringent test for it rules out a number of obvious candidates for learning organizations. Many universities fail to qualify, as do many consulting firms. Even General Motors, despite its recent efforts to improve performance, is found wanting. All of these organizations have been effective at creating or acquiring new knowledge but notably less successful in applying that knowledge to their own activities (Garvin, 1993).

The development model prepared for governments on how countries can maximize the utilization of human skills defines three key elements: the development of appropriate competencies, the activation of the competence portfolio, and the active utilization of acquired competencies (OECD, 2012).

Several important authors on this topic concluded that organizational leadership has a great influence on the final learning outcome which includes students (Brătianu, 2002, 2015b; Mulford & Silins 2003). Mulford and Silins (2003) examined how school works as a learning organization, the leadership approach, and the actual results are linked with one another. They concluded that via its rich impact system, school leadership has an indirect, but empirically justifiable influence on the learning achievements of students, and this impact system manifests itself through learning organization culture.



Even if they are widely acknowledged it is relevant to check them in as in each specific context they reveal new possibilities of organizational improvement. Following we discuss the basic principles and the five disciplines of the learning organization designed by Peter Senge. Systems thinking is the foundation of a learning organization that allows understanding the behavior of all components interaction, considered as a whole, in turn, enables the shift from reaction to the present reality in defining strategy and objectives for the future. A university is a large and complex organization which should be able to correlate harmoniously the work of all its components.

"The principle of creative tension is the central principle of personal mastery, integrating all elements of discipline" (Senge, 1990, p.151). The principle of personal mastery refers to increasing personal creative development and to discovering opportunities and challenges in the inevitable changes that occur. Acting this way, people will be able to learn, to develop their talents, to perform, to preserve the uniqueness and be continuously connected to the community. We appreciate that today the principle of personal mastery should combine the concept of lifelong learning and continuous personal development.

The mental models are defined as simple or complex theories generalizations and they influence how people perceive reality and thus, decide and act. It is very important that management should understand these mental models and put them into question whether it requires changing their surrounding reality. For instance, Marsick's view of culture aligns and supports Senge's mental model discipline. According to the authors, the mental models with the greatest impact are those shared by key decision makers within the organization. In order to create a positive 'mental model' within the organization is required openness and accreditation of merits. Openness is a requirement in learning organizations. The openness must be demonstrated outwardly and practiced inwardly. Outwardly, openness can foster an environment where employees are encouraged to contribute and discuss challenges within the organization. Inwardly, all individuals must be reflective and ready themselves to be receptive to new ideas (Senge, 1990).

Through the shared vision principle, the leadership must achieve a vision shared by all its members and thus the organization becomes more efficient in learning. By overlaying the employee's mindset upon the organization's one, it can identify differences, being able to accept the perspective of the organization. The development of a shared vision early on is an important step, because it fosters a longer-term orientation and demonstrates the importance of learning in relationship to the achievement of the vision (Senge, 1990). Thus shared vision generates employees' commitment to the strategic objectives of the company but under the freedom of choice.

The team learning principle supports the idea that the results of two separate people who think, taken together, are lower than the results of the two teams of thinking, communicating and acting together. Why? Because of a number of talents, skills, abilities of the two taken separately is lower than talent, skills, and abilities of the formed group. Reasoning, communication, and stimulation within the team add more value than thinking of its members taken separately. Peer learning is more valuable. Expressions through which Senge describes, not defines, the learning organization are numerous and compelling. Learning organization is any organization in which you

cannot learn because learning is so insinuated into the very life of the organization. Teams, not individuals, are the key learning unit in competitive organizations and are critical in providing quality service (Senge, 1990).

Thus the valorization of these principles in HES should be possible as there have been designed so many theoretical models, frameworks, procedures, and methodologies. We believe that there is much more work to be made for overcoming the obstacles and barriers of human nature. The overall perspective on universities is still positive as they are expected to be areas of unlimited and freely knowledge sharing among peers. However, the practice evidences that this kind of knowledge sharing is barely present within universities nowadays.

### **Concluding ideas**

Universities like churches are long lasting social institutions. Due to complex phenomena like social massification, globalization, internet explosive development and the Bologna process in Europe, universities must adapt to the new needs of society and enlarge their traditional mission. The main role in this adaptation process is played by the university governance, which can be defined as the constitutional forms and processes through which universities govern their affairs. University governance is the structural and functional framework that underpins the decision making of the academic leaders (Brătianu & Pînzaru, 2015).

Strategic thinking is based on intelligence and creativity because it searches for the best outcomes and for creating new knowledge when it is necessary. Taking into account how fast things change today, we may say that future is coming to us like a shock wave. Only by developing our capability of generating new knowledge and skills we may find answers we need for survival and for the challenging competitions that will come in the near future. We agree to the synthetic point of view of Baráth (2015, p.1494) who states that "The exponential pace at which knowledge is growing and how rapidly it becomes outdated as well as the extent of learning affecting our entire life, all bring learning abilities and attitudes into focus."

In order to give some directions of recovery for HES, we must retain the following lessons: 1. The bigger an HEI becomes, the less adaptive it will be once it overgrows its span of control. 2. HEI's need to be sensitive to environmental changes even if they are incremental. 3. HEI's may not mistake the absence of evidence for evidence of absence. They must learn "to expect the unexpected" (Taleb, 2012 cited in Janssen, 2015).

Thus, improving the quality of the public education system can only be achieved by developing the teachers and the institutions. Institutions employing highly qualified teachers and providing the right conditions for organizational learning, which also consciously and systematically develop their own knowledge asset (by selecting training programs and other development forms that are in harmony with their relevant, motivating and specific objectives) are the ones that are capable of gradually increasing their students' results and improving their individual chances in life. Students prepared this way, who enter the labor market, perform better at work, and those who have a higher standard of knowledge can enhance their individual

prospective as employees, thus contributing better to social development by being able to produce an added value (Baráth, 2015).

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